

Collecting ladies: Ferdinand von Mueller and women botanical Artists

by Penny Olsen

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This is a beautiful book for so many reasons and well worth the recommended retail price of \$39.99. The Contents page forces one to make a difficult decision—where to start. It is not a book that needs to be read sequentially from cover to cover, so one can dip into any chapter fancied. I began with ‘Mueller’s milieu: muses, minions and missed matrimony’, which by happenstance is the first chapter. I was curious as to the type of women who would catch Mueller’s attention and who would contemplate matrimony with such an adventurous and somewhat difficult man. Other chapters include: ‘art combined with literature’; ‘nature amuses the mind’; ‘compliments to your generous lady’; ‘like a charming spoiled child’; ‘more or less ladies’; ‘an enumeration of all fungi’.

The book provides a perspective of von Mueller different from the common one, and of course tells the stories of some fascinating women, along with a portrayal of their botanical art. Without intending to do so, von Mueller subtly aided the recognition of women as vital contributors to science. Their stories ‘illustrate the many challenges facing women of talent and ambition in the last half of the nineteenth century’ (p. 17).

‘More or less ladies’ tells the story of Rosa Fiveash 1854–1938. This chapter takes its name from a letter written by Lady Tennyson to her mother:

We have just had two Miss Fiveashes up to show us the most lovely collection of the Australian wildflowers which one has done ... I do not know anything about them but they are more or less ladies & well read, & kind little old maids. She would sell the whole of her collection for £200 which seems to me to be very little & I would give anything to have them’ (p. 164).

The quality of Rosa’s botanical paintings also was publicly recognised: in 1914, a report in



the *Register* about the accompanying illustrations to a work on orchids by Dr Richard Rogers stated:

‘Rogers’ descriptions ... are no match for the stirring fidelity of Miss Rosa Fiveash’s brush ... You unconsciously feel out to handle the flowers. Only the fragrance is missing ...’ (p. 170).

Her accolades did not please all, but I will leave this to readers to find out.

Collecting Ladies not only provides insights into the artistry and lives of these ladies, it also provides snippets of the lives of others; of the culture and social networking of these times; poetry; which paints to mix to achieve a green that would not brown with age; a way of speech that is no more; the types of plants used in gardens of that day (at least those of a certain class); the perception by some that our Australian native plants were beautiful and by others that they were ‘destitute of grace’; and much more. We learn that *Hardenbergia ovata*,

a climbing plant, '... may, by a careful use of the knife at the right season, be kept in the form of a garden shrub; and it is even used for hedges' (pp. 120–121).

The book is beautifully illustrated throughout with some of the works of these talented ladies. Examples include: detail of the Native Clematis and Coral Pea by Louisa Anne Meredith; a grouping of *Correa speciosa*, *Hibertia*, *Styphelia virgata* etc. by Euphemia Henderson (a would be bride of Mueller); a detailed composite of orchids by Fanny Anne Charsley; a beautiful rendition of one of the Blood Wood Eucalypts by Anna Frances Walker, *Bignonia jasminoides* by Harriet Scott; *Antheraea simplex* on *Eleocharpus obovatus* by Helena Scott; a composite of Passifloras by Louisa Atkinson; *Hardenbergia ovata* by Fanny De Mole; flowers of the Flame-Tree and Yellow and Black Twiner by Marianne North; *Jasminum calcareum* by Margaret Forrest (who gave Marianne North a 'kangaroo foot' of 'black velvet with yellow satin lining' to

paint); the beautiful Stinkhorns by Ellis Rowan; *Eremophilas* by Rosa Fiveash; *Lobelia gracilis* and *Abutilon halophilum* by Gertrude Lovegrove; *Agaricus pulchellus* by Flora Martin and *Pannus carbonarius* by Maria Magdalena Wehl.

This fascinating book is a fount of information, beautifully written and interspersed with intriguing quotes and photographs. The paintings of some of these 'collecting ladies' have made their way to Calendars for 2015, perhaps anticipating the Christmas season. If you need a gift for someone interested in history, in plants, in art or in literature, this book would be ideal. And if you are looking for a gift for someone who has not expressed an interest in such areas, this book could make them a convert.

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Living Waters: Ecology of animals in swamps, rivers, lakes and dams

by Nick Romanowski

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Fifty years of wetlands study has well qualified the author of this book to educate readers about how ecological patterns, processes and animal interactions merge into a seamless whole. He defines ecology, in a broad sense, to be the study of food, finding it and avoiding becoming it. What all organisms seek is food; shelter (protection from predators and climate); and a place to breed. The geographic scope of the book is the inland waters from Tasmania to the tropics, and its intention is to describe the underlying forces that drive ecological change and movement in Australian wetlands.

Although Romanowski is best known as a writer on wetland plants, his primary background and qualifications are in zoology and he trained at Monash University when Ian Bayly and Bill Williams were revolutionising the study of the

ecology of Australian inland waters. The writing is taut and easy to read and it is pleasing to see that nomenclature is up-to-date: things like recognising that the Silver Gull now resides in the genus *Chroicocephalus* and the fact that the freshwater species of the Anostraca are known as Fairy Shrimps while their saline counterparts are Brine Shrimps. Perhaps one criticism: phrases such as 'Many species haven't bothered evolving ways of protecting their flying wings' are unnecessarily facetious and add nothing to the imperative of enhancing scientific literacy amongst those who need it.

The book is divided into three sections, all copiously illustrated with the author's excellent photographs. The first six chapters are a roll-call of common or unusual species: crustaceans; insects; other invertebrates; fishes; frogs, reptiles